

Introduction to Academic Writing from an Academic Literacies Approach

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Abstract

In our paper we present a pilot project where we introduce new students to read, write and search for academic texts. We assume an 'academic literacies' approach, where these activities are seen as social practices that have to be practically acquired in authentic, meaningful contexts within the disciplines, rather than in separate courses and other support structures.

Introduction

During the last two decades, Higher Education (HE) in Sweden has seen a dramatic change in the student groups. A great expansion of HE together with an official agenda of widening participation has led to a more diversified student population. This may result in a challenging situation for both teachers and students, especially for the so called 'non-traditional' students. In this paper we present a pilot project where we introduce new students to academic writing from an *academic literacies* approach. It implies that we do not focus merely on the actual text production, but try to capture the more general meaning-making connected to the writing process, i.e. reading and discussing academic texts, as well as seeking for and critically evaluating academic information. Assuming an academic literacies approach means that these activities are seen as social practices, situated in the very contexts where they take place. Thus they have to be practically acquired within these contexts by authentic, meaningful tasks, rather than in separate courses and other support structures.

In this paper we present a pilot project conducted at Södertörn University, called Introduction to academic writing (henceforward called the Introduction), where we have tried to create such a meaningful, functional and authentic context. The project is a collaboration between the University Library, the Study Workshop, the Development Unit for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and teachers from the different subjects. We will also share some of our experiences from the project. Did we succeed in making a well-integrated, authentic and functional context? What worked well and what did not? How could this be explained? And what did we learn for the future that is useful for our project, as well as other similar projects?

In the following section we will elaborate on the change of the student populations and its implications for HE. Then the theoretical assumptions underpinning the project will be outlined. Next the project will be further presented and the way it relates to the theoretical assumptions underpinning the structure of the project. We will then evaluate some of our experiences from the project and discuss some comments from students and teachers enrolled in the project. Finally we will discuss the results of the evaluation and some conclusions that can be drawn, as well as implications for future development of the present project, as well as for other, similar projects.

The context: an expanded and more diversified student population and the ‘deficit thinking’

The dramatic change of the student groups in Sweden is due to official as well as local policies of widening participation and access to HE. At the same time, the number of students in HE has grown due to a great expansion of HE. This corresponds to a worldwide trend (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Smit, 2012) which has led to an increased social, cultural and linguistic diversity of the student population. Although diversity is one of the purposes of widening participation, it brings along new challenges for both students and teachers. Alongside this trend, an increasing debate about students’ falling literacy standard has emerged. This debate is also present in Swedish media and has been particularly vivid since the beginning of 2013, with HE staff claiming that “our students can’t write”, “the new students don’t know how to read a book” etc. However, much less attention has been paid to discussing pedagogical solutions and how to adapt HE in order to meet the needs of the new, more heterogeneous student groups.

A common feature in this kind of debate is that it is restricted to the ‘problem’ with students’ lack of writing skills, where writing is seen as an individual, technical, transparent and instrumental ability, that can be taught once and for all and then transferred into other contexts rather unproblematically. This type of ‘deficit thinking’ (Smit, 2012), that focuses on individual students, has been problematized and contested by several researchers who call for an opposite view, i.e. an *academic literacies* approach (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001; Lillis & Scott, 2007), further outlined below.

The academic literacies approach has developed from the field ‘New Literacy Studies’ (Barton, 1994; Street, 1984) and one of its main purposes is ‘to move away from a skills-based, deficit model of student writing’ (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158). Instead, the academic literacies approach takes into account the social dimensions of power and identity and the (often inexplicit) expectations from the HE staff and how these expectations are interpreted by the students. According to this approach, academic writing is seen as a part of a more general academic meaning-making where all academic communication, such as reading and writing academic texts as well as seeking and critically evaluating scientific information, could be included. These activities are seen as social practices and this implies that academic writing is a socially and institutionally situated act of identity (Lillis, 2001, p. 31). Developing academic literacies thus involves developing control of the various discourses used in different academic settings, i.e. acquiring the different social practices of different contexts in the academia.

Gee (2012) makes a distinction between *primary* and *secondary discourse*, where primary discourse develops during the first years’ socialization. Secondary discourses are used in different official institutions of the society, such as authorities, work places, education and religion. Gee defines literacy as the ‘Mastery of a secondary Discourse’ (Gee, 2012, p. 173), i.e. the mastery of secondary discourses. HE is a typical context where the mastery of several secondary discourses is required, i.e. control of the social practices used in academic settings. Social practices have to be acquired in functional and meaningful contexts, within the very discourse communities where they are used (Gee, 2012), i.e. integrated in the disciplines rather than in separate courses and other supportive resources.

An academic literacies approach also takes into account the social dimensions of power and identity and the gap between the expectations on the students from HE staff and how the students interpret these expectations (Lea & Street, 1998). In addition to many opportunities

to acquire the discourses in meaningful contexts it is also important that the demands are made very clear. Focusing therefore on authentic tasks and making the expectations of the tasks clear promotes the students autonomy and motivation (Cotteral & Cohen, 2003). Another important pedagogical approach is to allow time and space for reflection and dialogue 'where the students are able collectively to decode the practices of writing, so that this is no longer mysterious and unknown to those who had not had access to the forms of literacy most privileged in academic spaces' (Burke, 2008, p. 208).

The project

The Introduction is a collaboration project between the Library, the Study Workshop and Development Unit for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. In relation to the theoretical assumptions presented above, we have considered the following points of departure in the development of the project:

- Reading, writing, seeking for and critically evaluating information all constitutes an integrated whole belonging to a more general academic meaning-making: academic literacies.
- Integration in the subject studies is crucial in the creation of a meaningful and functional context. The introduction thus must constitute a compulsory part of the course, where the reading of a text and the tasks are authentic parts of the studies. Functionality is also obtained by explaining not only how to write, but also the reasons for writing in a specific way and the functions that it will fulfill.
- Explicitness and progression is important in order to meet the needs of the students. By making the expectations very clear and allowing space and time for the students to deconstruct and discuss the practices of academic writing, an inclusive and empowering learning situation is created that is particularly beneficiary for heterogeneous student groups.

During the first semester, fall 2013, seven subjects were involved in the pilot project and about 400 students took part in the seminars. The seminars are divided in two parts that last for three hours each. The staff from the Library, the Study Workshop, Development Unit for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and the teacher from respective subject design the seminars together to make sure they are well integrated into the course curriculum as a whole and constructively aligned to learning outcomes and examination (Biggs, 1999). The seminars are held by a teacher from the Library and a teacher from the Study Workshop. To give students opportunity to practice information seeking and reading and writing academic texts is the main purpose of the seminars. Although the content mainly has been the same during all seminars in all subjects we have also had the possibility to evaluate and make smaller changes in design and performance during time. A more detailed presentation of the content and structure of the seminars will follow.

Seminar 1

- Academic literacies: why and when to write academic texts?
- Introduction to assignment for seminar 2
- Discussion on article focusing on structure according to traditional academic texts
- How to read a longer academic text

- Different kinds of academic and nonacademic texts
- How to seek for and evaluate academic information

Seminar 2

- Response to the assignment:
 - Teachers' response to the whole group
 - Students' response to each other
- Further information-seeking
- Summary and evaluation

Seminar 1

The content of seminar 1 will be outlined more in detail below.

Reading academic texts

As a preparation for the first seminar the students read a short article that is a part of the mandatory curriculum and is discussed on a seminar with the teacher. As the purpose is to introduce new students to the academic context the seminars are mandatory. On a theoretical level the ambition is to move from a monological to a dialogical pedagogy and engage the students as much as possible in the discussion on academic literacies matters (Lillis, 2003, p. 197). The first seminar starts with an introduction to the academic context that departs from the students' own experiences and perceptions of academic writing. Here, the students are prompted to discuss on why and when to write academic texts and how research is built upon previous research that needs to be referred to in your own writing. After that the students are divided in small groups for a deeper discussion that mainly focuses on the structure of the text. The model used for the discussion that was handed out to the students can be summarized in the following questions:

- What kind of text is this?
- What is the purpose of this text and where do you find it?
- What method does the author use?
- What conclusions does the author draw and where do you find them?

Not all texts that were read and discussed during the seminars were logically structured according to academic conventions. In some texts it was easier to identify an explicit purpose presented in the introduction while a more essayistic kind of text did not have an introduction or a list of references at all, which made it more difficult to identify, for example, purpose and conclusions. A non-typical academic text could of course make a starting point for a discussion on how an academic text should be structured but during an introduction it seems easier to do the reverse, which means get to know the conventions first and then be acquainted with digressions. Between the seminars the students write a short summary of the article that is discussed during seminar 2. As a preparation for the task the students get guidelines for writing a summary such as how to write a self-supporting text, topic sentences, paragraphing, text structure and references. A part of the task is also to add a reflection of their own that might be connected to a contemporary event or highly discussed phenomena in society that in some way highlights the main thoughts of the article as it is understood by the student.

Searching for academic texts

We have made use of different ways of connecting the tasks to an examining part of the main course although examination has not been applied in all participating subjects during the first semester. That was kind of problematic since it was not fully clear to the students how the seminars are integrated into the course curriculum and this was a factor that could lower their motivation. In one case, the students were supposed to search for another fifty pages of academic text for their home assignment and in two other cases, the assignment was revised after response on the academic literacy seminar and handed in to the teacher for examination. As the project continues, all students have to search for a complementary academic text that will either support or argue against their own reflections on the main article. One of the strategies on searching for academic texts that is practiced is learning how to use previous research for further information-seeking. The exercise on information-seeking can be performed stepwise starting with an interpretation of the article's list of references and trying to identify what kinds of publications the author has used and is referring to (for example doctoral dissertations, scholarly articles or chapters in books). Using references can be a way to start seeking for information in databases mainly containing academic information. Another way of using previous research, in this case, is to use the article that has been discussed in order to find names of authors or researchers, keywords and key contexts that can be used for information seeking in subject-related databases and search tools connected to academic information, such as the national catalogue Libris or SöderScholar (a search tool at Södertörn University that provides students access to academic material).

Seminar 2

The contents of seminar 2 will be outlined more in detail below.

Constructive feedback

Between the seminars the teachers from the Library, the Study Workshop and Development Unit for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education read all students writing but do not give individual feedback. Instead, a group feedback is undertaken, based on examples from the students' texts. During the feedback, the students have the possibility to ask questions concerning their own texts as the teachers walk around talking to each group. The results of the students' writing differ of course and some main weaknesses can be identified in, for example, writing references although the students are given templates for referencing. Some students also show difficulties in constructing a self-supporting text and in some cases it is very close to the original text referred to. Other students show mastery of self-supporting texts, connecting an aspect of the article to a reflection of the students own that is supported or argued against with the help of another academic text. An important matter such as title can indicate in what amount the following text will be self-supporting. The main part of seminar 2 is dedicated to imparting feedback from student to student, after being first introduced to some guidelines for giving constructive feedback. The model used is inspired by Lauvås and Handal (1998) and highlights the following aspects:

- Point out what is good (well performed) in the text
- Point out what parts should be kept
- Point out guidelines for finishing what is left to do
- Mediate energy and joy to the writer

The purpose is to give the students tools for giving and receiving feedback and to reflect upon their own text so that they can revise it before sending it to the examiner.

Evaluation

We have made a first evaluation of the pilot project and in this section we will present some comments and perceptions from the students and the teachers from the subjects involved.

Comments from students

What did the students learn? During the last seminar they make a summary and evaluation of what they have learned during both seminars on information-seeking and reading and writing academic texts that they upload on a learning platform. The results obtained from the students summaries on what they find most important to think of can be seen here:

- How to consistently and correctly write references
- How to design an academic text concerning for example self-supporting texts
- How to read in different ways such as extracting the essence of a text and the importance of getting an overview before starting a closer reading on a longer text
- How to search for and evaluate information
- New kinds of search tools
- How to identify different kinds of academic texts

It is possible that the students' summaries reflect the questions and aspects on academic writing and information-seeking that has been most recently raised during the seminar. Overall, the results indicate that the summaries match the content of the two seminars and thereby seem to serve the purpose of the introduction to academic writing. In the evaluation of the course the students were asked to grade in what amount they would have further use for the seminars on academic writing in their future studies. Mark that these questions were not a part of the evaluations in all participating subjects during the first semester, but is based on 84 students. They showed that about 50 % found the seminars useful, 43 % found the seminars very useful while 7 % thought they would have no use of them. A more thorough evaluation such as interviews with each student would give a deeper understanding on what expectations they had on the Introduction and what improvements they think they have made on information-seeking and reading and writing academic texts. What is most striking in the students' evaluation is the desire for individual feedback on the first version of the writing-task.

Comments from teachers

How do the teachers evaluate the Introduction and have they noticed any progress in the students' writing skills? When looking at the students' final written assignments two of the teachers participating in the project spontaneously noticed that the students have made progress, especially concerning referencing but also when it comes to structuring a text. It might be a little hasty to draw the conclusions that these improvements are a direct result of the exercises performed during the two seminars on academic writing. It would take some years to evaluate if and in what way the project has affected the students' progress concerning academic literacies (seeking for information, reading and writing academic texts) from A- to C-level. One of the teachers also have tried out the seminars' model for discussion on the structure of an academic text and found out that the students have been better prepared for the literature seminars, and displayed a better understanding of the text that enhanced the quality of the discussion during the seminar. This result shows that with quite a small effort teachers themselves can practice academic literacies for example by using the model for reading academic texts that is used during the first seminar of the Introduction.

Discussion

The units involved have evaluated the pilot project together. The evaluation is based on experiences from the staff involved in the project together with the experiences from the students and teachers from the subjects described in the previous section. These have been collected and discussed in several follow-up meetings, both internal meetings with all the units and in meetings with the teachers from the different subjects. Did we succeed in making a well-integrated, authentic and functional context? What worked well and what did not? How could this be explained? And what did we learn for the future that is useful for our project, as well as other, similar projects?

We found a great variation in the outcomes and success between the different subjects involved. Some student groups displayed a very high level of involvement and attended the seminars well prepared and very motivated. Other student groups obviously regarded the seminars as separated from their compulsory course and did not seem to appreciate the value of the different tasks. Below we discuss some possible explanations for these varying results.

How the Introduction was presented in the course manual and other written documents from the subject

In some of the subjects the Introduction was mentioned separately in the written information and it was not very clear that it was an integrated, mandatory part of the course. In some student groups this implied that only about half the students showed up since they had interpreted the information as if the Introduction was a separated, voluntary and less important part of the course. In other subjects, the written information was clear and the Introduction was presented at the same level of importance as all the other seminars and lectures of the course, which implied that all the students showed up. Because many new students find the demands and work load of academic studies challenging in the beginning of their studies, it is only natural and could be expected that they leave out parts that they perceive as less important or less relevant. It is therefore crucial that the information about the Introduction is very clear and indicates that it is just as relevant as the other parts. Otherwise some of the students will miss the Introduction, probably the ones who may need it the most.

How the Introduction was referred to and introduced by the teachers of the subjects

Some of the students had interpreted from their teachers' verbal information that the Introduction was optional and that they could attend to the seminars if they felt that they needed it (even if it was treated as a compulsory part of the course in the written information). Some teachers also referred all questions regarding the Introduction and whether its tasks were mandatory or not to the teachers responsible for the Introduction, thus signaling that this was a separate part and not as important as the other parts of the course. This led some of the students to believe that they could choose not to attend, and thus were astonished when they found out that the information in the course manual, that "all seminars are mandatory", also included the Introduction. In other groups, the students did not seem to differentiate between the Introduction and other seminars of the course, which we believe could be related to how the teachers referred to the Introduction.

How the text was chosen and introduced

In the pilot project we let the teachers from the subjects choose the texts treated in the Introduction. However, we found that some of the texts were difficult to treat in the seminars, since they were either not very typical academic texts (e.g. no clear purpose could be detected in the text), or too difficult for the students to grasp, considering it was one of their first texts as new students. In other groups, it was not made clear that the students were expected to prepare themselves by reading the text before the seminars and that it was a compulsory text

in the curriculum. In other cases the text that was chosen was not included in the curriculum. Hence the students could show up without having read the text or without being very motivated to work with it. However, if the text chosen was a compulsory text also treated at other seminars and included in the exam, the students appreciated the value of having an extra opportunity to process its content and showed up well prepared and very motivated to discuss it.

How the task was integrated in the course curriculum

In some of the subjects, the tasks were connected only to the Introduction and did not constitute any part of the course. That is, even if they were compulsory, they were not treated as the other assignments of the course, and thus not really authentic tasks. In these cases, some of the students seemed less motivated as they worked with them. In other subjects, the tasks were used as compulsory assignments and were a part of the examination, which means that they were authentic tasks for the students, e.g. the written summary of the text was rewritten after the feedback and constituted a part of a written examination. In these cases, the students were very motivated when working with the text and paid a lot of attention to the group response. Likewise, when the task used for information-seeking constituted a part of the final exam of the course, i.e. the students could search for another text during the seminar and also print it and then include it as a source in a written assignment, they were very active and motivated during the information-seeking tasks.

To conclude, our evaluation seems to confirm the theoretical assumptions. The Introduction worked best when we managed to create a meaningful and functional context (Gee, 2012), i.e. where the students perceived the seminars and tasks as an authentic and equally important part of the instruction. When academic writing was introduced as a social practice including reading, writing, discussing texts and searching for and evaluating academic information, rather than as a separate skill (Lillis, 2001), a meaningful context was created (Gee, 2012), that enhanced the students' motivation and active participation in the instruction. In addition, the use of an authentic task seemed to promote the students' motivation (Cotterall & Cohen, 2003). This indicates that a productive way to meet the needs of the new, more heterogeneous student groups is to design the instruction with a lot of opportunities to develop academic literacies, in progression and with the demands made very explicit, integrated in the compulsory subject studies rather than in separate support structures. Lillis emphasizes that teachers should focus on design for finding new ways of meaningful academic practices and should have student writing in mind while developing new pedagogical approaches (Lillis, 2003, p. 194f).

Overall our evaluation indicates that both students and teachers find the Introduction to academic writing valuable. A more thorough evaluation such as interviews with the students would give a deeper understanding on what expectations they had on the introduction and what improvements they think they have made on searching for, reading and writing academic texts as well as what expectations they had before the seminars and how the activities matched these. Comments from the teachers of the subjects indicate an improvement in the written exams as a result of the introduction. However, further evaluation and research on this topic needs to be undertaken in order to establish this.

Practical implications

Based on our experiences from the pilot project we made a check-list of conditions (presented below), that we find necessary in order to create a well-integrated and functional context for acquiring academic literacies. A majority of the subjects involved wanted to continue with the Introduction and were prepared to follow these conditions, whereas a couple of subjects did

not want to continue under these conditions. However, as the experiences from the pilot project further convinced us of the necessity of integration in the subjects and participation and involvement of the teachers, we were only prepared to continue the collaboration provided that the conditions in the following check-list were met:

- The information about the introduction must be very clear in the course manual and other written documents. It is important that it is introduced as one of other parts of the course with the same dignity. Therefore the information must be formulated in collaboration with the teachers of the subject.
- It is also important that the teachers of the subject introduce the Introduction as an integrated part of the course and do not refer to it as something separated from the rest of the course.
- The text used in the Introduction is carefully chosen by the teachers of the subjects in collaboration with the other units involved. Also the text must be a part of the curriculum and treated at other seminars of the course.
- The tasks fulfilled in the seminars, both the written text and the information-seeking task, are included in the examination of the course.

We argue that this kind of conditions, i.e. clear information, subject integration, teachers' involvement and authentic texts and tasks are crucial when designing new pedagogical approaches to students' development of academic literacies.

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